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ABSTRACT

This paper is organized around a goal-complication-resolution framework of questions: What do people want from higher education?; How could people achieve what they want?; What is stopping them?; and What can they do about it? The paper's context is writing in the disciplines, rather than composition specifically or academic writing in general. The paper begins with three propositions: (1) Every academic discipline wants committed, engaged students who produce interesting and academically credible texts; (2) The purpose of academic writing is not merely to reproduce what others have said, but for even the beginning student to find something new or at least additional to say; and (3) This contributory ability will also be helpful in later, non-academic contexts within contemporary socio-economic conditions. The paper states that, for composition teachers, this disciplinary focus is relevant in that they need to be encouraging the disciplines to take more responsibility for student writing. It cites a number of obstacles which prevent a field or conversational approach from being comprehensively applied, including lack of explicit instruction in the writing conventions of the discipline (encouraging continued use of classroom genres), and prior or existing knowledge is not explicitly engaged. According to the paper, in the absence of a disciplinary field, practice is overly dominated by a "field of assessment" in which the practice of the new entrant tends to be marked by caution and conservatism. Three ways of counteracting the entrenched problems are suggested in the paper: centering historical topics or issues in relevant contemporary debates; explicit disciplinary instruction in academic writing; and tasks which express a disciplinary field context and invite a dialogic/persuasive response. Contains 3 references. Attached are "summary points." (NKA)

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New College Writers and Academic Credibility

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ED 475 209

Paper presented at the Annual Conference on College Composition and Communication
(54th, New York, NY, March 19-22, 2003)

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New College Writers and Academic Credibility

These presentation notes are organised around a simple goal-complication-resolution framework of questions:

- What do we want from higher education?
- How could we achieve what we want?
- What's stopping us?
- What can we do about it?

The context is writing in the disciplines rather than composition specifically or academic writing in general.

1. What do we want for higher education?

Let's start with three propositions:

(i) Every academic discipline wants committed, engaged students who produce interesting and academically credible texts.

(ii) The purpose of academic writing is not merely to reproduce what others have said, but for even the beginning student to find something new or at least additional to say; in other words, to

"contribute to a scholarly conversation knowledge that is not necessarily found in source texts, but that is carefully linked to texts students read" (Stuart Greene, qtd in Weese et al., 6).

(iii) And this contributory ability will also be helpful in later, non-academic contexts within contemporary socio-economic conditions (the "information society").

2. How could we achieve it?

Given an acceptance of these propositions, and the fact that they are far from being realised in practice, how can a contributory role for students be achieved? That is,

"how do we encourage our students to become active contributors to a body of knowledge rather than passive recipients of knowledge?" (Weese et al., 12).

(i) Some research supports the idea that students are best inducted into a discipline by presenting it as a *field of competing positions* or theoretical approaches, or, more cooperatively, as a "conversation" in which students, too, can participate through oral

discussion and through their writing. This view of disciplinary activity has much in common with the sociology of Pierre Bourdieu, and with understandings developed in recent literature on "situated learning", "socially shared [or "distributed"] cognition", "community of practice theory", and "activity theory" (see, for example, Freedman and Adam, 2000).

In other words, if their texts can reflect and perhaps even further this conversation, these texts will be properly academic (*credible*) rather than resembling the "classroom genres" (Johns, 1995) of previous schooling.

(ii) The second and related requirement is that students be able to draw on their personal experience so that the disciplinary debate has some connection to their lives rather than being encountered as abstract or "academic".

" If students are to write well about a given topic or problem, they need time to develop their thinking, so that they come to terms with what they feel and believe . . . Thus it makes sense to let them write arguments based on personal experience at the beginning of the course, so that they can define a problem for further inquiry and then develop an argument based on their reading and original research that is meaningful to them." (Weese et al., xvi).

Weese et al. are referring to a composition course rather than a conventional content course. However, our research was predicated on the idea that this approach could be applied in disciplines traditionally dominated by a transmission model of pedagogy.

For us as composition teachers, this disciplinary focus is relevant to us in that we need to be encouraging the disciplines to take more responsibility for student writing.

3. What's stopping us?

The research that we have been doing (involving volunteer students, lecturers, and tutors from the disciplines of English Literature and Women's Studies) shows that a number of obstacles are preventing a field or conversation approach from being comprehensively applied. These include:

(i) *Teachers placing themselves in the mainstream of perspectives in the discipline*, rather than adopting a partisan view or presenting a range of perspectives. For example, lecturers referred holistically to "this discipline" (Women's Studies lecturer), or "mainstream literary criticism". Attitudes are contrasted in *social* (i.e. between academy and wider society) rather than *disciplinary* terms.

(ii)Disciplinary conflict, if it is referred to, is typically presented as diachronic rather than synchronic. Literary criticism, for example, is presented as a historical field in which the interest is in the ways in which the ideological assumptions informing ways of reading change over time. "As our views change over time, the literature canon is

revised." This approach puts aside conflicts or differences over ways of reading that exist at any one time.

(iii) *Traditional task or question design tends to establish an informational rather than persuasive context.* It would appear in relation to English that assignments are mainly about providing practice in the core traditional technique of close reading. For example, the student quoted below answered a question that was basically expository: it asked for an explanation that could be answered by analysis of given texts, rather than the development of an opinion. And the lecturer pointed out that the requirement on students is to explore relationships between different textual treatments rather than different disciplinary positions. As far as debate or conflict goes, the emphasis here is again upon differences between the discipline as a whole, on the one hand, and popular views in the wider society on the other. That is, the course is clearly intended to disturb some conventional assumptions about literature, such as the distinction between primary and secondary texts.

(iv) *Education is perceived as a cognitively staged and progressive emergence of skills* rather than an increase in sophistication through practice. The lecturer in English pointed out that some effort is made to provide a disciplinary overview, but it is constrained, among other things, by the need to interest students and to give them some grounding in the discipline prior to foregrounding differences or debates.

(v) *Lack of explicit instruction in the writing conventions of the discipline*, which encourages continued use of classroom genres. An A- student said: "I just answered the essay question. I've been taught that. In [upper high school] you have to be to the point." Even this student was so caught up with the word limit that she appeared not to be able to envisage the tutor having other considerations in mind.

"Even though they say not to worry about the word limit it's best to be over the limit than under. She did want more. To add the information would make it much longer. Especially the comments at the end where she has added a whole thing of what I haven't talked about and to elaborate on ideas. That says it should have been longer."

"I added in the point about art for art's sake versus art as an expression of the artist but I didn't think that was what the question asked. If I hadn't put it in, she may not have wanted more on it."

(vi) *Prior or existing knowledge is not explicitly engaged.* This is a difficult issue for literary studies, since one of the problems they perceive is the difficulty of breaking the hold of the rather naïve approach to literary study that students bring with them from school.

(vii) *Finally, the pervasive influence of the traditional institutional context that is the combined result of the above practices*, and is so deeply entrenched that it would likely resist new practices even if they were attempted. The key factor here is the perception of the lecturer as the oracle of the discipline.

"I wouldn't want to feed back tutor's ideas – she would know they are not your ideas. It's OK for lecturers because they are general."

"I think it was 50% my ideas, but then I had absorbed the lecturer's ideas – I hadn't thought of it before."

Overall Result:

In the absence of a disciplinary field, practice is overly dominated by a *field of assessment* in which the practice of the new entrant tends to be marked by caution and conservatism. Some comments by the A- student reflect many of the issues presented above.

"My material came mainly from the course book. I don't take a lot of lecture notes except for those specifically for the essay . . . I took a couple of books out of the library, but they were at a more advanced level than I needed. I just skimmed them to find a couple of lines."

"From the comments they wanted more social background than what I put in. She mentioned that I should have written more about the Victorian public but I disagreed because we hadn't discussed it in class."

Interestingly, the student is unable to appreciate a distinction between a request for elaboration and her own demand for concision and respect for the word-limit.

"I was editor of the school newspaper so am a ruthless editor, but the comments from the tutor made me realise that I had made things really concise. I wanted to get to the idea quickly and say the ideas compactly. Where she says 'you could have written this . . .' I probably had but then cut it out."

"She said word count was not an issue, but I think it was, because in her comments she was pushing me to write more."

This emphasis on meeting the conditions of assessment provides the stake – what is lost – in not adopting a dialogic approach. The transmission model is not broken, and traditional models of writing prevail, "models that depict writing as a set of skills rather than as a meaningful engagement with ideas" (Weese et al, 6).

4. What can we do about it?

I can think of three ways of counteracting the entrenched problems detailed above.

(i) *Centering, or basing, historical topics or issues in relevant contemporary debates* – or imagined scenarios – in which students as citizens can be expected to have an opinion.

(ii) *Explicit disciplinary instruction in academic writing*. In other words, providing students with more direct exposure to the kinds of textual and rhetorical strategies customary in a specific discipline.

(iii) *Tasks which express a disciplinary field context and invite a dialogic/persuasive response*. Essay tasks have to make more explicit as well as more possible the response that is expected.

"The question does not say 'discuss'. You could have taken the question that way but I didn't."

"It was successful because it was a concise essay and I was able to show that I understood the question."

A further possibility emerged at an earlier session of the 2003 CCCC convention. Briefly, the first-year composition programme at Duke University has been revised to allow experts from various disciplines to work in the writing programme as composition teachers but using the content of their disciplinary specialties. More specifically, such teachers teach their disciplinary topics exactly as I am advocating, i.e. as a debate or field of different positions. A further bonus of this approach is that these teachers maintain that if or when they return to their disciplines of origin, they will continue to teach their courses in this way.

5. Conclusion

The main key to introducing a field or conversation approach is to see that the activity of learning is not usefully seen as a developmental process determined by fixed cognitive constraints. Rather, the student is immersed immediately in a complex environment, which moreover includes activities the student would be familiar with from other activity systems or fields of endeavour (i.e. there is no clear separation or progression between systems). It is therefore better to see the student as engaging with the full gamut of the system's operations from the start, but in a progressively more sophisticated way. This suggests that reference to the disciplinary field from the outset would be legitimate.

This point is supported by the realisation that the student is operating in a field even in the traditional situation, a field made up of the teacher(s), the course materials (texts), and the student who typically positions him/herself with the question, What does the teacher want?

"I wish they had made it clear what they really want instead of prodding you after you wrote the essay."

The related requirement is to make use of the knowledge and experience the students bring with them.

"If changes conducive to authorship are to be brought about . . ., this means that the diversity of experience, position, and worldview that students bring to the classroom are not ignored, suppressed, or simply honored and left alone. Rather, pluralism is recognized as the rhetorical if not the epistemological condition in which all [citizens] must learn to think, talk, and write. In a nation of authors, my differences from you give shape to the possibility of your authorship, and yours mine" (Deborah Brandt, Afterword to Weese et al, 199).

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New College Writers and Academic Credibility

(Derek Wallace: Victoria University of Wellington, NZ)

Summary Points

What do we want?	That, from the outset, university students can "contribute to a scholarly conversation knowledge that is not necessarily found in source texts, but that is carefully linked to texts students read".
How can we achieve it?	• Provide a disciplinary field approach for undergraduate study. • Allow students to draw more fully on their personal experience.
What's stopping us?	In summary, the entrenched institutional context, in which practice is overly dominated by a *field of assessment*.
What can we do about it?	• Link to contemporary debates • Explicit instruction in disciplinary rhetoric • Dialogic tasks

What's stopping us?

- Teachers placing themselves in the mainstream of perspectives in the discipline.
- Disciplinary conflict, if it is referred to, is typically presented as diachronic rather than synchronic.
- Traditional task or question design tends to establish an informational rather than persuasive context.
- Education is perceived as a cognitively staged and progressive emergence of skills rather than an increase in sophistication through practice.
- Lack of explicit instruction in the writing conventions of the discipline, which encourages continued use of classroom genres.
- Prior or existing knowledge is not explicitly engaged.
- Finally, the pervasive influence of the traditional institutional context that is the combined result of the above practices.

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